

971: Helping ADHD with Food: Science-Backed Strategies for Lasting Change With Julie Matthews

Child: Welcome to my mommy's podcast!

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sleep. It sharpens focus, it improves energy, and so much more. But hydration is not about just drinking water because being optimally hydrated, a state called euhydration is about optimizing your body's fluid ratios. And this fluid balance depends on many factors, including the intake and excretion of electrolytes, which many people don't get the right amounts of. Electrolytes are charged minerals that conduct electricity to power your nervous system. I talk a lot about nervous system on this podcast.

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Katie: Hello and welcome to the Wellness Mama Podcast. I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com, and I am back today with Julie Matthews to tackle the topic of helping ADHD symptoms with food, specifically science-backed strategies for lasting change. And she talks about studies she's done of just how dramatically helpful these things can be.

She is such a fun guest to talk to, and I found out in this episode she does Japanese drumming and fire dancing as hobbies, which I think are new as far as guests. But in this episode we really go deep on the topic of ADHD and specific interventions that are particularly helpful for kids who have ADHD symptoms.

If you missed our first episode, we go into the topic of autism, and she is an expert in both as a certified nutritional consultant and published researcher with over 20 years of

experience in these very particular topics. Especially complex neurological conditions, particularly autism spectrum disorder and ADHD.

She has a master's in Medical nutrition and she's the co-author of two different research studies that show the efficacy of nutrition and therapeutic diet intervention for autism spectrum disorder. And she provides one-on-one help to many parents and children who have the symptoms and works with them to find their personalized approach that is going to work most effectively. So let's jump in.

Julie, welcome back. Thank you for being here again.

Julie: Thank you, I'm glad to be here.

Katie: Well, if you guys missed it, we've recorded an episode all about autism and very specific strategies that can be really supportive and helpful. And in this episode, I'm excited to build on that conversation and really get into the world of ADHD and food and how there are some really science backed strategies that parents can use that can make a tremendous difference. And we're gonna go deep on that in this episode. Before we do though, I have a note from your bio that you do, I believe it's pronounced taiko, which is Japanese drumming as well as fire dancing. And I would love to hear how you got into those.

Julie: Oh, wow. Well, I live in the San Francisco Bay area, so I found out about fire dancing when I was in Golden Gate Park one day, and I just immediately fell in love with it. And its, I do a type of fire dancing. There's a lot of different fire. I do one called poi. And so it's two balls on the end of strings or chains, and you move them around in different directions and it's great for the brain, but it's also just really, really fun to do.

I tend to not do it with fire because it is fairly toxic, so I mainly do it with lights these days. But it's one of it, it's very fun. It's very meditative for me, and I feel, it really gets me into what I call like a flow state. So it just, it's a nice way since I spent a lot of time in my brain, doing, you know, all the nutrition research, it kind of gets me into more of a body state.

So it's very therapeutic for me. And then taiko is something that I actually discovered because my daughter, when she was, she's, this was about 10 years ago, she was in a little tiny ballet class. And in this dance school they also do taiko. And we both fell in love on that very first time we saw it. And if people are wondering, taiko, you may have seen the really huge, huge drums with the really, really big drumsticks that is taiko.

It's very loud, it's very, it just really hits you in the heart. It's amazing. And watching the young girls and the young adult women do this very empowering art form, it was just very inspiring. So I started doing taiko and it's one of my favorite things. So thanks for asking. Copyright © 2025 Wellness Mama · All Rights Reserved

Katie: I love that and as as far as I know, you are my first guest that does either of those things. And that's so cool that you got to do the drumming with your daughter. I feel like anytime we can enter our kids' worlds and love something that they love that's such a beautiful bonding experience. And anyone who listened to our first episode knows how much of a wealth of knowledge you are on the topics we're gonna go into today.

But I would love to start by talking about any underlying factors when it comes to ADHD that we know can be influenced by diet and kind of set the stage for the specifics we're gonna talk about in this conversation.

Julie: I think the big one is inflammation, and you mentioned that in our first conversation on autism. Inflammation is just so core to every chronic condition. From autism to thyroid challenges to anxiety, depression, there's often an element of inflammation that's involved with that. And so I guess the really good news here is that food can either be inflammatory and we can remove those things, or it can reduce inflammation by choosing anti-inflammatory foods. So we can do so much with addressing inflammation from the foods that we eat. And I, so I think that's a really, really great area we can really intervene and something that everybody can do.

You know, we know more typically more vegetables, more fish oils, more olive oil. Those things are gonna be anti-inflammatory. So the more we eat a whole foods diet, generally speaking, the more anti-inflammatory it will be. Now I think we'll need to individualize that and personalize it some, because some foods that are non-inflammatory to some people, it might be to other people. But generally speaking, I think that's a really good underlying factor. And then just looking at the health of the gut. I think it's so important for all of us to look at how is our gastrointestinal tract? Are we absorbing those nutrients?

Because if we can't break down the foods and absorb the nutrients, then we can't get the good things that we need for our brain to function.

Katie: I love that, and we're going to get to go even more specific on that, and I also wanna just preface the conversation by saying as well, I know there's a lot of debate around ADHD and if at least part of what we're labeling as ADHD is that it's maybe perhaps not the most natural thing in the world for kids to sit still at a desk for eight hours a day.

And I certainly can understand that idea as well, and that I personally think kids would be much better supported, like we talked about in our first conversation, if they got to spend a lot more time outside and moving around. That said, I also know there are many children who do have a lot of these struggles with some of the symptoms associated with ADHD.

And it seems like based on your work, there are some very specific things that parents can do that will help them. Not to take away the parts of ADHD that I feel like could actually be a superpower, but to thrive within that without struggling so much in their environment. And vulnerably I'll even share, a few years ago I did a bunch of brain testing and work with a neuroscientist because I had had a lot of, I had had a skull fracture and a TBI when I was very little.

And it turns out that actually my brain adapted in a very cool way that helped me have like great working memory. But he asked me in that training, he's like, has your ADHD ever gotten in your way? And I was like, oh, well I actually, that's the first I've heard of it, so I guess not. But it was so interesting to like have that word given to me and to like decide that I'm gonna view that as a superpower.

I don't feel like it's something that gets in my way. And there's an insight there into how can I best support my body and my brain understanding that without taking on like the negative labels that come with it. So I would love to delve into kind of a two part thing of what are some of the foods that we know that can contribute to ADHD symptoms?

Like you mentioned in the first episode, there are certain foods to avoid and I would guess there might be some similarities here. And or are there any things that are especially supportive for anyone who has ADHD symptoms?

Julie: Yes. I mean, I love everything that you said. I absolutely agree. You know, whether it's autism, ADHD, we're not, I'm not trying to, you know, change somebody's neurodiversity. We all have strengths that can develop. What I'm trying to do is help reduce the suffering that people might have. And that's true with any condition where, you know, we didn't really talk about this in the autism one, but if you have chronic diarrhea and you can't focus because your tummy is hurting, and you, that could be ADHD too.

Then we're just trying to, I'm trying to get to how do we make you feel better? So that whatever your God-given gifts are, they can shine through. And so that's really, I think where I look to for all of this. So I'm looking at foods that can help them to really nourish their brain, nourish their body.

Maybe we can at this point maybe go into one of the strategies I think, which is sugar. Reducing sugar in the diet is I think, really important. And you know, I think if you talk to moms leading back to, you know, 50 years ago, they would tell you sugar is not great for my kid. When they come back from a birthday party or something they are very hyperactive. They, you know, are acting out in ways that they don't normally do. They're not able to focus as much. That is something that we as moms have often seen for a long time, but it's not,

it's often not talked about. Or it's not talked about in how actually powerful a low sugar diet can be. And sugar is interestingly, actually one of the reasons I got into all of this, many, many 20 some years ago was because I was at a kid's fair and I saw that they were, the all the food was not only pizza, but donuts and just junk food. And I thought, you know, all of this cannot be good for them. And so we actually often feed our kids some of the worst foods. You know, you don't usually go to a party for adults and have it be filled with, you know, donuts and a lot of sugar.

And so I feel that we need to kind of take a little more care in the foods that we feed our children. And also with that, sugar is often loads of artificial blue food coloring in the frosting in the cake or red food dye. And you know, those kinds of things which are, can be, again, we've seen for moms could tell you for many, you know, even in the seventies and earlier, that these food colorings can be very detrimental to behavior and focus and things like that.

And we even have research in the recent past where we know that they can create hyperactivity and other types of behavior challenges for any kids. So I think, you know, those are just a couple things that I would say are great things to reduce in the diet and are really gonna make our whole family healthier.

So this is not about maybe pulling out and pinpointing one child that needs to do something different than all the others. It's something that we can really apply that's gonna really help all of us with our metabolic health. You know, none of us need that sugar. We're all gonna do better without it.

So, you know, just a little bit about how to just support our families in a way that's going to really can make a really huge difference for some people. And we can get more specific into some of the diets and other things as we go. But you know, I think that's a little bit to get us started.

Katie: Yeah, I feel like there's, like, moms have kind of led that charge of understanding, like moms see these things and how they are impacting their kids. And it's like the research is now catching up to what moms have already sort of tuned into in a lot of ways. I also know I hear from parents who, especially if their child has some form of neurodiversity, they often gravitate towards very specific foods or only want to eat certain categories of foods.

Do you have any practical tips for when you work with parents on kind of making that switch. 'Cause I know often kids, even just neurotypical kids can be resistant to dietary changes.

Julie: Yes, you know, I talk a lot... after working with lots of kids, I realized that I can put together this, you know, really wonderful diet, but if they don't eat the foods, then we don't even get to step one. So one of the things I learned early on is that we need to make it so that they're gonna enjoy it.

And kids do just generally have different preferences, but children with developmental delays, about 80% of them are picky eaters. And that goes even up for certain groups, like people with autism, it gets even more specific. But just any kids in general. I think looking at texture can be a really great place to start.

So if you think about something like kale or broccoli, if you steam it or boil it, it gets very mushy, very limp and floppy and even maybe slimy to them, you know? So if we can make it crispy and crunchy, maybe we make kale chips. Maybe we look at making that broccoli just lightly steamed or something like that, that can go a long way.

Or maybe we blend it up and put it inside of something. Maybe we take squash, like butternut squash is sweet, but it can be really mushy. So can we blend it up and put it with eggs and make it into a butternut squash pancake or something like that? How can we make it in a texture they like? So I think that's really, really important.

And if there are parents whose children do have picky eating habits, realize you are not alone. It is a vast majority of the people that I work with, and it's not something that you're doing wrong. It's not something, I don't even think it's something that's behavioral. I think it's something that is built into texture and sensory sensitivity and there could be other components. There could be an anxiety component to try things that are new. So there's a lot of ways and different approaches for different people.

But, you know, it was really important for me to really focus on how can we... I have a whole step on addressing picky eating because like I said, you know, when I put things in the book, like, get more liver in the diet, well, I'm aware that most kids are not going to love liver. So let's add it to something like a burger in a percentage that's small enough that they're not even gonna notice it's there. It just adds to the really good flavor that's in it and enhances and brings out that flavor. So I'm, you know, really wanna focus on helping people get those nutrient dense foods in that might otherwise, not be something they could consider even being able to do.

Katie: That makes sense. I can see the texture part being a big piece of it. And it also seems like, at least I've seen in my own life, is as we start making these changes, our body over time does adapt and learn to want and crave those foods as we implement them. So

there's a seemingly an adaptation phase, but it's not gonna be that much of a battle long-term, even for us internally. So I feel like that's important to highlight as well.

Julie. It's a huge point with any kind of new change in diet, whether it's a therapeutic diet or lower sugar or like you're saying, more vegetables or whatever it might be is a learning curve. And it can be kind of steep at the beginning 'cause you're learning all sorts of new things and you don't have control over whether a child eats the food or not.

So that can be a learning curve to figure out what do they like, how do I make it in a way that they like? We can, we have control over what we serve them, but we don't have control over whether they eat it. So it can take some time. And that learning curve can be a little challenging at first, but once we make those changes, it's really not any more difficult to cook those foods and feed that way than it is any other way.

And when we have children that are happier and feeling better it makes our whole day easier. And one of my good clients and good friends now says, you know, I would happily cook in the kitchen all day if I had to and see my child happy and healthy in the background. So, you know, it doesn't usually take all day, but the point being there that it's worth it in the end. It's worth it for us and it's worth it for them.

Katie: That makes sense and I feel like that's an important point to highlight. I talk about that in reference actually to parenting a lot that we have a lot of ability to like mold their environment to make the purchasing decisions for the household. But at the end of the day, we can't actually control our kids.

We can't force them to do anything. Any parent who's ever tried to force a two-year-old to eat what they want them to eat knows this very well. And so I think there's also value in really bringing our kids into this, these shifts and educating them and helping them understand how these things are gonna benefit them. So that during that learning curve they can hopefully touch on some intrinsic motivation to make those changes.

And then also then they're paying attention as they start feeling better, and it can be driven by their motivation instead of our emotional responsibility from the outside. I feel like that's a more powerful shift. And I would love to talk about some of the specific diets that you feel and in your work are most helpful, specific to ADHD.

Julie: There's two that really stand out for me just immediately, and one we talked about was low sugar, so a low sugar diet. And the other one is something called a low salicylate diet. And this is something that I think most parents haven't heard of, or many parents haven't heard of, and it is so beneficial.

It's kinda my secret, I always say secret weapon, but it's kind of, I would say that it's something that most people are not aware of and it can play such a powerful role. So salicylates are... there's a diet called the Feingold Diet that's been used since the seventies by a doctor named Ben Feingold who is using it for behavioral challenges and things like hyperactivity and inattentiveness and things like that.

And salicylates... and the diet was low in natural salicylates and a food, a variety of food additives. So it's a diet that's low in artificial colors, flavors and preservatives, and low in salicylate.

Now I use a variety of different low salicylate diets, so there's more than one. And I have kind of my own that I have adapted that kind of brings in what I think of kind of some of the best of all the principles. But salicylates are a naturally occurring compound that are found in really good nutritious foods, and this is where it can become a challenge. Fruits and vegetables like berries, strawberries, raspberries, grapes, apples, a variety of vegetables, spinach, and bell peppers and things like that.

And so what's challenging is parents are gonna be thinking, well, those are all good foods. I don't wanna take them out. And I would agree if you don't need to take them out. And I would also agree that I like to look at diet as a short term thing. How do we remove the foods that are really aggravating the system and then heal the underlying factors and then go back to eating as many of these as we can. And I talk a lot about a threshold for them. So maybe a cup is too much, but a half a cup works, or four strawberries work, but 20 strawberries don't, or whatever that might be.

So how do we get some of those good foods but not bother them so it's creating hyperactivity, irritability, aggression, red cheeks and red ears, challenges with sleeping at night. You know, when you're having aggression... I had a client, now this client did have autism, but their aggression was quite significant and their parent was quite concerned about how this was gonna impact their future. They were lashing out and injuring therapists and things.

Well, when they went to a low salicylate diet, that all disappeared. And so it can be a profound dietary approach. And so I like to look at, you know, how do we implement the diet when we need to, but how do we heal the underlying factors? And how do we evolve the diet over time so we can get the best of both worlds, which is nutrient dense foods, while reducing those that are bothering them?

And not all fruits and vegetables and things are high salicylate, but for example, cinnamon is really high. So sometimes just knowing, okay, I'm gonna choose this kind of apple and I'm

not gonna put cinnamon in it and I'm gonna make my apple sauce that way rather than a different way. And so sometimes just understanding those differences can really make a profound difference for somebody.

Katie: That makes sense. And how do dietary strategies compare to conventional approaches when it comes to kids in ADHD and their symptoms?

Julie: Well when we look at something like when... oh, so in the last episode we were talking about autism. We did a study on looking at diets. Now it was for kids with autism, but one of the symptoms we looked at was ADHD. We looked at hyperactivity and we looked at inattentiveness. And for hyperactivity, 45% of individuals improved their hyperactivity with that Feingold diet and 43% reduced their hyperactivity with a low sugar diet.

You'll be hard pressed to find any intervention that helps almost 50% of individuals. And so when we're looking at you know what alot of the parents that I work with are looking at for. How can we do the least invasive, the least side effects, that kind of thing, and get some of the best improvements?

And so this is where those improvements really, really can shine through. Now with the study that we did, we looked at, we didn't look at all medications, so we, but we looked at some certain psychiatric and seizure medications and things like that. And we looked at other supplements and diet was some of the top top interventions for improving hyperactivity in individuals that had hyperactivity. But in this case, they did have autism, so it was a little bit different. So I don't wanna make a direct comparison. But you know, when we look at just what parents are saying, if we can get a profound benefit by reducing red food dye or yellow food dye or something like that, that's often what I hear parents are really looking to do.

It's just that sometimes they're discouraged from doing so. They're told that it doesn't make a difference or don't get your hopes up, or how is something so simple gonna make a big difference? Or if it's allowed in our food supply, how could it really be that bad? Or why haven't I heard of it before? And I'm just here to say that in the research and in just clinical experience, it can make a profound difference.

Katie: Yeah, I agree with you and I mentioned in our first episode, but I saw that play out very directly in my life with thyroid issues and being told that diet didn't have any impact whatsoever. There was nothing I could do about it, and I would be on medication for the rest of my life. And again, none of those things ended up being true.

And now I take no medication and have optimal thyroid labs. So I think there's value in always asking why. And I tell my kids that all the time, question everything, even, and

especially me, always ask questions. And I think also you touched on something important that I feel like really applies to every area of health, which is that often we can underestimate the simple things because of their simplicity, and yet those can sometimes be the most profound

The small dietary shifts, the getting morning sunlight, the going to bed at a consistent time, the simply making sure we're hydrated. Like the little almost free things can sometimes have the biggest impact, especially when we do them consistently. And I love that you've gotten so specific to really help kids by understanding strategies that are easy and parents can practically implement that can make such a big difference.

And I'd love to, in our remaining time, touch a little bit more on gut health. And especially, I know we hear about the gut brain connection. And seemingly in a lot of kids with neurodivergent symptoms, there's some form of gut irritation or leaky gut or something going on in the gut.

So what can parents do to really take into account the gut and the microbiome and support kids on that level?

Julie: Yes, the gut and the brain are connected, but there's actually an axis called the gut brain microbiome axis, and each one influences the other. So the gut influences the health of the microbiome. The microbiome influences the health of the gut. They both influence the health of the brain, and they all can be influenced by food.

So we know we can look at probiotics, that good bacteria that are in our gut. There are many probiotics that are actually called psychobiotics because they have direct beneficial effects on brain chemistry, on mood, on anxiety, on depression, on all sorts of things. They affect the brain in many different ways.

And so one of the things in our modern world is, you know, sometimes someone might need an antibiotic or someone might not be aware, and maybe they end up with a number of rounds of them, and that can really affect the microbiome. Or in our environment, in today's world, we do lots of antibacterial soaps and we have, we, and we don't eat a lot of... you know, everything is sanitized. And yeah, there's some good to that, but we also have good microbes on our skin and things like that.

And so we want some of those good microbes because they actually help create nutrients that we need, B vitamins and other vitamins that are important for the brain, important for our health. We, they have, as I mentioned, those direct effects on the brain. They build compounds in the gut, short chain fatty acids with that help with gut health and actually can influence the brain in other areas. So, with all that said, the microbiome is really key.

And in the old days if we were gonna have vegetables through the winter, we would be making things like sauerkraut. Almost every culture has some sort of cultured vegetable, but in today's day and age, we pasteurize everything. And so they don't, we don't usually get that. So looking for ways to improve the microbiome to eat more prebiotic fiber rich foods that can support the growth of those beneficial bacteria. Getting those good probiotic foods. They can make a real difference in our overall health, the health of our gut, and then the health of our brain.

And I think they're things that really go back to some of those foundational principles that we really developed as humans with. And I think they can really, really be beneficial in helping with various aspects of mood, behavior, ADHD, and I think they get overlooked sometimes.

So those are some keys. We also wanna remove the inflammatory foods, so whether that's dairy or gluten for somebody, or sugar or whatever that might be for those individuals. Those also help just to support the overall health of the microbiome in the gut.

Katie: Got it. That makes sense. And I know from both of these conversations, there's obviously the personalization aspect is huge because you mentioned like a lot of these things work in a large percentage of kids, but that there's like more nuanced strategie for each specific case. And I know that you dive deep with parents and help figure out what those are for each child and really take them into account as a whole.

So if people want to keep learning from you, tell us about your book and also where people can find you and work with you directly.

Julie: Well, my book is the, it is called the, the Personalized Autism Nutrition Plan, but it's nourishing hope for kids with ASD, ADHD, anxiety and other neurodevelopmental delays. And I think that's important because yes, it is about autism, but because I really wanted to give families with autism a really important place to go. But ADHD is a very common, firstly, comorbidity or common occurrence within autism, so we talk about it a lot. But the similar underlying factors that affect kids with autism, affect kids with ADHD. So we talked about a few of them: inflammation, the gut, the microbiome, detoxification, things like that.

And so, many of the same principles apply, and I have sections in the book in different areas where I talk a lot about ADHD. And actually I started my learning and my career in ADHD before I discovered autism. And that's because as I was studying ADHD I found so many similar underlying factors that it got me into studying autism, which really took off from there because so many people needed help and there weren't a lot of solutions with autism. So, with that in mind, they can find more about me, they can get my book. They just

look for, they just search Julie Matthews Autism Nutrition. They'll find my book, but they can also find me at the website, which is personalized autism nutrition plan.com

They can find out more about my programs, my work, my book, my services, and you know, all of that.

Katie: And I will include all those links in the show notes if you guys are listening on the go. All of that lives at wellnessmama.com . Julie, this has been another fascinating conversation. I love how personalized you get and how many people you're helping with your work, and I'm so grateful for your time today and for all that you've shared. Thank you so much for being here.

Julie: Thank you for having me.

Katie: And thank you as always for listening and sharing your most valuable resources, your time, your energy, and your attention with us today. We're both so grateful that you did and I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of The Wellness Mama Podcast.